

Press release

Parliamentary oversight of arms exports having an impact

New report on arms export control in Western Europe published

Global spending on arms and armaments continues to rise, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). At the same time, effective oversight and transparency mechanisms are lacking. The independent French armaments observatory Observatoire des armements has compiled a report on parliamentary oversight of arms exports in Western Europe, on behalf of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Brussels Office.

The report identifies the control mechanisms that exist in France, Germany, the UK and the Netherlands and how effective they are. It also contains recommendations for strengthening the oversight and transparency of arms sales. Calls for tighter control over arms exports are nothing new. However, the hearing of the appeal of the judgement against Heckler & Koch in the case of illegal arms exports to Mexico at the German Federal Court of Justice shows once again how necessary the debate on effective arms export control is.

France lagging behind its European partners

The European Union Code of Conduct on Arms Exports requires all Member States to submit data on their arms sales to the European Council on an annual basis. Unlike other countries, France has actually gone backwards in terms of transparency. While other national reports list exact types and quantities, the French version only breaks down the financial amounts according to the categories of the EU's Common Military List of equipment. In addition, the Netherlands, Germany and the UK have, unlike France, suspended their arms sales to Saudi Arabia, where weapons are being used in the war in Yemen.

"European arms exports must be massively curtailed. But for that we first need transparency, public debate and democratic decision-making. European countries therefore have a fundamental obligation to provide information and justification when it comes to arms exports. Arms sales cannot be a matter for governments and corporations alone. They concern us all and should be open to public scrutiny," says Andreas Thomsen, Director of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Brussels Office.

MPs' commitment ensures democratic scrutiny

The Observatoire des armements report demonstrates the effectiveness of parliamentary oversight bodies: "Parliamentary oversight and transparency measures mean that information is directly accessible and no longer solely dependent on the work of NGOs and journalists, as continues to be the case in France," explains Tony Fortin, a researcher at the Observatoire des armements. "In Germany, it's evident that the government is coming under pressure not least because of the considerable commitment of MPs from DIE LINKE (The Left) and the Greens, who ask around 50 very well documented parliamentary questions each year. Democratic scrutiny is based primarily on such efforts. Unlike DIE LINKE and the Greens in Germany, no French political party has made a really significant restriction of arms sales part of its agenda."

Civil-society mobilisation and political will are crucial

While the role of parliament is key, there is only so much that parliamentary oversight can achieve. Civil-society engagement also has a vital role to play. The report makes clear that civil society, trade unions and non-governmental organisations in Germany, the UK and the Netherlands have been instrumental in stimulating public debate and making parliamentarians aware of the problem. In this context, parliamentary oversight is the intersection between civil society and MPs on the one hand, and MPs and the government on the other.

Policy recommendations to strengthen oversight and transparency

Among other things, the Observatoire des armements calls for an early warning system in the form of prior vetting of arms export applications to sensitive countries such as those where war is being waged or human rights violations are being committed. While detailed reporting on arms sales does create more transparency, sustained oversight of arms export policy requires the prior exchange of information with parliament. This is the only way that parliament can perform its warning function and block controversial orders. The Observatoire des armements also recommends setting up an ad hoc parliamentary committee to discuss export policy for weapons systems on a regular basis. Such a committee would allow access to defence secrets and support the efforts of MPs.

Full report:

www.rosalux.eu/parliamentary-oversight-of-arms-exports

Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is an internationally active, non-profit organisation that carries out political education activities and is affiliated with Germany's DIE LINKE (The Left) party. We are committed to peace, democracy, social justice and democratic socialism based on international solidarity. The RLS Brussels Office is a think tank that addresses European and international issues from a left-wing perspective.

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Observatoire des armements

The Observatoire des armements is an independent centre of expertise aimed at supporting civil society work on defence and security issues and promoting disarmament. It is committed to a policy of transparency and democratic control of military activities in France and Europe.

